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SUBJECT: CENTRAL ELECTIONS COMMISSION'S PREPARATIONS IN
DISARRAY

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Central Elections Commission (CEC) Chief Hanna Naser described preparations for presidential and legislative elections, scheduled for January 24, as "at an impasse" pending the results of ongoing Cairo-based reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas. Naser dismissed the idea that voting be held in the West Bank and East Jerusalem but not Gaza, should Hamas refuse to allow it, as "political suicide" for the PA. Naser noted that the CEC intended to make an announcement in approximately one week on elections' feasibility, but was vague as to what the CEC would do without Hamas agreement to allow elections to proceed in Gaza. End Summary.

CEC ELECTIONS PREPARATIONS IN "A MESS"

¶2. (C) In a November 9 meeting at CEC headquarters in Ramallah, CEC Chief Hanna Naser told DepPolChief that the CEC was "in a mess" with regard to preparations for presidential and legislative elections scheduled for January 24, 2010. "It was very important that Abu Mazen issued that decree (announcing elections) on October 23," Naser said. "It was absolutely necessary -- if not, we would have drifted into an illegal status." At the same time, he said, Hamas's apparent lack of interest in holding elections in Gaza gave it a virtual veto over the holding of a successful poll. "How do we hold an election when one-half of the country will not accept it?" Naser asked. "We're at an impasse."

CEC: BEST SOLUTION IS RECONCILIATION

¶3. (C) Naser said that the CEC could envision no conditions under which a credible election could be held without Hamas's participation, something that could be achieved -- in Naser's view -- only through the signing of a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo. "We know the answer to whether Hamas will concede to elections in current conditions," he argued. "It will not. The only concession possible from their side is the signing of the Egyptian (reconciliation) agreement. Then a solution is possible. The best scenario is that Hamas signs the Egyptian paper, and elections are scheduled for June or July (2010). Then we have another six months to prepare."

CEC IN WAITING MODE FOR NEWS FROM CAIRO

¶4. (C) Naser said the CEC had been "hoping" for a

reconciliation agreement prior to Abu Mazen's October 23 call for elections, and that it was "disappointed" none had been forthcoming. In the absence of a guarantee of Hamas's and Gaza voters' participation, he said, the CEC's preparations for January 24 elections remained nominal. "We're trying to convince Hamas to let us do voter registration (in Gaza)," he said. "We have half-a-million new voters we need to register (overall). But there's been no response yet (from Hamas). We have to wait a little longer, see what happens in the next few days. We (the CEC) have one more week, and then we'll announce the result of our deliberations."

ELECTIONS WITHOUT GAZA "POLITICAL SUICIDE"

15. (C) Naser and other senior CEC officials present were dubious about the prospect of elections proceeding in the West Bank and East Jerusalem alone, in the absence of Hamas agreement. "I know some people are talking about that," Naser said, "but I think it's political suicide. I don't think Abu Mazen (with whom Naser met on November 8) wants to go down in history as the man who did that. In the event that there is no agreement (with Hamas), there are other mechanisms for governing, besides elections, that can be used. The thing that is often forgotten is that these are not true elections -- they're taking place under occupation. So there are other mechanisms that can be considered."

CEC VAGUE ON NEXT STEPS IN TECHNICAL PREPARATIONS

16. (C) Naser was vague about the mechanics of any possible

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post-reconciliation electoral campaign, arguing that in the event that Hamas and Fatah came to agreement in Cairo (or elsewhere), the 13-18 million USD needed to fund elections would be easily found among the international donor community, and that USG and European pressure would "force" the GOI to allow voting (if not campaigning) in East Jerusalem, with Hamas candidates on the list. "We've started the process of (CEC-GOI) coordination," Naser said. "We've written a letter for Saeb (Erekat, PLO chief negotiator) to pass to the Israelis; from here, he can do the negotiation. I think this and the money are the simpler part. We will find a way."

COMMENT

17. (C) The CEC's optimistic party line about the likelihood of Hamas signing up to compete in 2010 elections, the availability of international donor and GOI cooperation in that event, and the CEC's ability to conduct large-scale voter-registration drives on short notice may stem from the CEC's track record of administering previous polls under challenging conditions. It may also reflect a lack of attractive alternatives. Naser made it clear that in the absence of reconciliation, he considered the problem set facing Abu Mazen and the PA to be essentially political, rather than electoral, in nature -- and that without reconciliation, he did not believe that elections would be capable of conferring legitimacy on either Fatah, or the PA.

RUBINSTEIN